A MAN AND TWO SONS.

Luke 15: 11-32

This morning I wish to invite you to look, with me, at a very familiar passage of scripture;- the parable that is known as the Prodigal Son. In choosing this well-known passage as a sermon text I am motivated by two phenomena which I see happening in the Church. Firstly, from the fundamentalist circles of the Church at large I hear the clarion call to return to Biblical preaching. In the mid-west, and I presume it is true here also, the air-waves are flooded with preachers touting themselves as expositors of the Bible. But the content of their deliverances never quite fulfills lofty introductions. Biblical preaching today, unforturately, usually means lifting a portion of scripture out of it's context and retelling, through a series of variations, a story that everyone already knows. No thought is given to the context, the motivation, the "historicity" of the moment when the passage was first proclaimed. This, I would suggest, is not Biblical preaching at all.

Secondly, I see a reaction to the fundamentalists in the more liberal churches. We just don't read the Bible. We don't read it devotionally; we certainly don't study it. In fact for most Presbyterians, what we call the word of God, has become little more than a pious version of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

This morning I want to take a fresh look at a parable we all know. And, as we begin I ask you to forget everything you've ever heard about the prodigal son; in fact, I ask you to forget that title, for as my sermon title suggests, I'm not at all convinced that the parable is concerned with prodigality.

There are a few general comments that ought to be made about the Parables at this point;.. Firstly, a parable is a literary device.

It is a tool used in teaching; the first century equivalent of film strips and flannelgraph. To understand a parable we have to see that Jesus composed it; he drew from everyday life situations; he used people and objects of nature. They were not wild stories -- but stories that, conveivably, could have happened in any day in the life of ~~every~~ any man.

Secondly, a parable is an illustration. In other words, the point of the parable lies beyond the story it tells. A parable is a means to an end. If we remember this we will avoid much of the abuse the parables receive. They are illustrations of a point Jesus was driving home; they are not simple moralisms good for every situation. For instance, if the parable of the mustard seed were a moralism, it's point would be that ("good things come in small packages".) Obviously this is not ~~all~~ what Jesus had in mind. The parable I have chosen is particularly vulnerable at this point; and has been subjected to as much abuse, and probably more, than any other.

Thirdly, a parable has one main point, and only one. There may be more than one character; there may be two or three motifs-- this is true in our text for this morning. But the interpreter must try to tie it all together-- and discover the major thrust; the single point our Lord was making.

The parable I have chosen for our text this morning has traditionally been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But, there are three actors in this little drama story; and, frankly, I'm not at all certain that ~~the~~ traditional prodigal plays the leading role. ~~In fact, I would~~ think we ought to begin by saying ~~the~~ there are three ~~are~~ mutually interdependent -- and that the point Jesus was making is clear, only if we allow each his distinct role. I'm sure you know the three;-the Father who raised his two sons-- the father who gave the younger son his part of the inheritance-

-and then forgave him when he squandered it. The younger son, who seems the epitome of youthful rebellion and irresponsibility; the older son who is obedient and respectable. Somewhere, in the complex relationship of these three is the one maim point of the parable.

It is easy to forget this and I have heard it blatantly forgotten many times. I have heard the parable used as a jumping off point in a sermon dealing with a child's respect for his parents. The story appears readymade for the task; the young son is a complete catalog of what we feel is wrong with young people today. Likewise, the older son, ~~xx~~ obedient, respectable-- is the kind of son every parent wants. But this is not what Jesus had in mind. I have heard the parable used to drill home traditional moralisms, such as the evils of drinking and loose living. It seems again to be up to the task. The young son was a bad son-- he lost all his money in a spending spree-- he threw his home training to the winds in one brief binge. And, he got what was coming to him. The moral; (save your money, avoid drink and loose women and stay at home.) Admittedly, this is not a bad idea. But it is about as distant from the immediate contxt--and therefore the true meaning--as we can get.

The parable is actually the final of a series of three parables-- that comprise Jesus' response to a certain specific situation. Too frequently we lift these passages from the text without even asking, ("why and where and who?"); and, as a consequence, we are rarely able to apply them to our own life situations. The ("why and when and who") of this parable are clearly set forth in the first two verses of the 15th chapter. Jesus had been teaching; the preceding chapter indicates that ("great multitudes accompanied him") and as the 15th Chap. begins, we read, ("now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Paarisees and Scribes murmured, saying: 'This man

receives sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable".

~~This is the context that prompted the parable.~~ In the context of the first century situation that prompted the parable there are three participating actors. Firstly, there is Jesus the teacher—the one who received others at his table and into his company. Secondly, the tax collectors and sinners.— Tax collectors were societies worst; the quislings, the ones who sold their souls to Rome by extracting the hated tax from their countrymen.— The sinners were the poor people-- the people who made up the great mass of Jews. They had forgotten their heritage; they paid little heed to the laws or the temple ritual. They had little time for the niceties of gracious living. The third party is the group of Pharisees and scribes who had also gathered around Jesus. They were obviously upset by the way this man so freely received the riffraff; ~~why~~, he even ate with them; they were constantly seen in his company. By association he seemed to be conding their sin; their flagrant abuse of the law-- and all the time-honored mores and customs. And so the third party murmured and we can be sure that their murmuring was full of pious indignation and righteous resentment.

This is the context; the stage, as it were, for the unfolding drama of the ensuing parable. In this ~~context~~ framework it is difficult to ~~even~~ call the story, "the parable of the prodigal son". For it is much more; he is but one of the actors; and in the original context, perhaps the least significant of the three. In light of this background then, the parabolic symbolism is clear. The younger son, the traditional prodigal, is the 1st group. The tax collectors and sinners. The elder son--the Pharisees and scribes. And the father--the father's attitude toward his son, refers to God.

The two sons, as actors in a story, reveal in concrete terms two expressions of man's sin. For the moment let us assume that sin

is like physical affliction. \ Here in this parable the young son breaks his leg. \ He disregards all the rules. \ He takes his inheritance and flagrantly violates every moral and ethical code existant. \ He gets drunk, he lives with prostitutes, his is a life with no holds barred. \ In time he is reduced to utter degradation, no task was so foul for the Jew as feeding swine. \ But this son feels pain; he knows something is wrong, he comes to his senses and in humility and penitence returns to his father. \ The reunion is jubilant. \ The son has repented; and the Father, on his initiative, restores the old relationship. The break is set --and healed.

The second son, however, if we pursue the idea of sin as physical affliction--has a virus lurking somewhere in his system. \ Unlike his younger brother, he has no visible stain, there is no break. \ Unlike his brother he has done nothing wrong; technically he has committed no sin. \ And unlike his brother, he feels no pain. \ And yet, this son is sick. \ His disease, lurking in his system, is pride and arrogance. \ He has been good, \ compared to the dastardly behavior of his brother he has been saintly. \ He is the one who should be rewarded. And the virus comes to the surfact and his illness is revealed in his complaint, ("these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when that son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf.") His father's response is kind; what has been said is true; the father makes no argumentative retort; but accepts the son, forgiving him also. \ But the son has not seen; he has not felt the pain of his sin. \ So caught up in the injustice of the moment is he that he completely misses the lesson that is being taught to him. \ The parable ends with this disconcerting finale. \ For the older son there is no

redemption; no healing; his virus is still present. And we can imagine that he returned to his work wallowing in resentment and self-pity.

At this point I would think the Pharisees and scribes would be squirming; they had been gently, and yet brilliantly rebuked. But like the older son, we can assume that they too missed the point.

Now that we have seen the context; the why of the parable we can apply it to our lives and times. In Jesus day it was a barb, administered to respectable, religious people. And in this light the question now becomes, "do we have the courage to interpret the Bible responsibly and honestly?" Do we have the courage to apply the parable, and it's contents to our own lives?- Can we pursue the parable's intent and see that we are perhaps more the older son than the prodigal--and that our illness is much more serious than a broken leg?

Reinhold Neibuhr is a contemporary theologian who has, in my mind, been the definitive voice for modern ethical theology. He deals with spiritual pride in his monumental work, "The Nature and Destiny of Man" in a way that fits right into a sermon. I can't assume to do better than Prof. Neibuhr, so allow me to read some of his words. "Moral pride makes virtue the very vehical of sin, a fact which explains why the N.T. is so critical of the righteous in comparison with publicans and sinners..... The sin of moral pride, when it has conceived, brings forth spiritual pride... For this reason religion is not simply, as is generally supposed, an inherently virtuous human quest for God. It is merely a final battleground between God and man's self-esteem. In that battle even the most pious practices may be instruments of human pride."

History is full of object lessons here. The worst form of class domination is religious class domination, such as the Indian caste system. The worst form of racial prejudice is that which finds it's insidious

illustrated last week by the murder of 4 young catholics by a group of Prot. in N. Ireland.

rationale in religious writing; the worst form of intolerance is religious intolerance. The worst form of self-assertion is religious self-assertion, in which the particular interests of a man are hidden beneath religious absolutes. A modern missionary has said, "What goes by the name of religion in the modern world, is to a great extent unbridled human self-assertion in religious disguise". Pascal noted that, "Discourses on humility are a source of pride to the vain." One could go on quoting authorities for eternity. The point is clear--religious pride is the worst we can do--the worst we can be.

Optional check first

Neibuhr makes another telling point later in his argument. He points out that the whole Roman idea of Papal infallibility is a direct contradiction of the N.T. But then he reminds us, "That as soon as the Protestant assumes that his more prophetic statement and interpretation of the Gospel guarantees him a superior virtue, he is also lost in the sin of self-righteousness. The fact is that the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers may result in an individual self-deification against which Catholocism has more adequate checks."

The older son in the parable, the Pharisees and scribes, displayed religious, or spiritual pride. It seems to me that contemporary Christianity frequently borders on the same fundamental error that caused Jesus to use this parable. Like the Scribes and Pharisees we would prefer a doctrine of sin that can be expressed in a legalistic code; the following of which makes ~~a man~~ one a righteous man. For the scribes and Pharisees it was some 600 regulations of the law. For modern Roman Catholics it is a similar code of behavioral prescriptions. And for contemporary Protestants it is a preconceived morality based on not smoking, not drinking, not dancing and so on. If we have the courage to read this parable honestly we are driven to the conclusion that these three approaches to religion share the common error of missing completely Jesus' teachings

This, for me, is a sobering thought. But the parable is clear that forgiveness, that joyful reunion with the father, is a possibility for all men. God forgives; on his own initiative he prepares the fatted calf. In Jesus Christ he has acted on our behalf. He has opened , for us, the door to His kingdom.

Let us never forget that in the parable the son who was the prodigal was restored, but the good s on, returned to his work--bitter, arrogant ...and unredeemed. Let us have the courage to face the fact that the grace of God extends to all men, in and out of the Church. Let us have the courage to be honest with ourselves, and to allow a new humility, a new need of forgiveness to grow out of our honesty. And then let us ask our father to forgive us.